

EXCLUSIVE

Iran Was Closer to a Nuclear Bomb Than Intelligence Agencies Thought

If Tehran pulls out of the 2015 deal, it could have a weapon in a matter of months.

BY MICHAEL HIRSH | NOVEMBER 13, 2018, 6:02 PM

A secret Iranian archive seized by Israeli agents earlier this year indicates that Tehran's nuclear program was more advanced than Western intelligence agencies and the International Atomic Energy Agency had thought, according to a prominent nuclear expert who examined the documents.

That conclusion in turn suggests that if Iran pulls out of the 2015 multilateral nuclear deal that U.S. President Donald Trump has already abandoned, it has the know-how to build a bomb fairly swiftly, perhaps in a matter of months, said David Albright, a physicist who runs the nonprofit Institute for Science and International Security in Washington, D.C.

Iran would still need to produce weapons-grade uranium. If it restarts its centrifuges, it could have enough in about seven to 12 months, added Albright, who is preparing reports on the archive.

Before the 2015 multilateral nuclear deal mainly negotiated by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, that would have taken only two months, but under the accord Iran was required to ship about 97 percent of its nuclear fuel out of the country and dismantle most its centrifuges.

Experts say the revelation that Iran had more advanced capabilities to make nuclear weapons themselves—as opposed to its ability to produce weapons-grade fuel, the main focus of the nuclear pact—is a surprising and troubling finding in the new intelligence.

“The archive is littered with new stuff about the Iranian nuclear weapons program,” Albright told [Foreign Policy](#). “It’s unbelievable how much is in there.” One of his key conclusions from studying the documents was that the Iranians “were further along than

By using this website, you agree to our use of cookies. This use includes personalization of content and ads, and traffic analytics. Review our [Privacy Policy](#) for more information.

The archive, which is well over 100,000 pages long, covers the period from 1999 to 2003, a decade before negotiations on a nuclear deal began. But the trove of documents demonstrates that Washington and the IAEA were constantly underestimating how close Tehran was to a bomb.

“The U.S. was issuing statements that it would take a year at least, perhaps two years, to build a deliverable weapon. The information in the archive makes it clear they could have done it a lot quicker,” said Albright. He added that the French government, which was then saying Iran could achieve a weapon in three months, was much closer in its estimates.

Analysts were still sifting through the archive, said Albright, who is also known for tracking North Korea’s nuclear program and for investigating Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction programs going back to the 1990s. “I don’t think even the Israelis have gone through it all,” he said. “Every day when they go through it they see something new.”

Mossad agents seized the archive in a daring nighttime raid on a warehouse in Tehran at the end of January. In late April, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu revealed some of the content in a speech that was panned as a melodramatic attempt to prod Trump into leaving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the formal name for the Iran nuclear deal. “These files conclusively prove that Iran is brazenly lying when it said it never had a nuclear weapons program,” Netanyahu said.

Iran’s deputy foreign minister, Abbas Araghchi, **called** Netanyahu’s presentation “a prearranged show with the aim of impacting Trump’s decision, or perhaps it is a coordinated plan by him and Trump in order to destroy the JCPOA.”

Trump announced the United States was withdrawing several days later.

In the period described in the Iranian archive, current Iranian President Hassan Rouhani—who later signed off on the JCPOA—was national security advisor. According to a draft of the first report by the Institute for Science and International Security, which was obtained by **FP**:

“Rouhani was a central, ongoing figure in the nuclear weapons program in the late 1990s and early 2000s. It is difficult to find evidence that his support for nuclear weapons ever ended.”

While Netanyahu’s presentation highlighted Iran’s deceptiveness, the institute’s analysis focuses on how Iran managed to “put in place by the end of 2003 the infrastructure for a comprehensive nuclear weapons program” intended to initially produce five nuclear

The analysis was done by Albright, Olli Heinonen, the former deputy director-general for safeguards at the International Atomic Energy Agency, and Andrea Stricker, a senior policy analyst at the institute. The three concluded that by the late 1990s, Iran had already developed “a full range of technical competences and capabilities, not just some, as characterized by the IAEA in late 2015.”

The authors also indicate that much is still unknown about what remains of Iran’s nuclear weapons program. “The program’s remains, and likely some activities, have continued up to today. The question of where all this equipment and material is now located is more urgent to answer.”

Albright, who has gone to Tel Aviv several times to comb through the archive—most recently two weeks ago—says he is certain the information, which has also been verified by the U.S. government, is authentic. It is consistent with “the thrust of what the IAEA had collected,” he said, but more detailed.

The archive casts no light, however, on whether Iran was observing the 2015 deal, and most experts say Tehran was cooperating at the time that Trump withdrew.

Alexandra Bell, a former Obama administration official who worked on compliance reports for the JCPOA, said that even if the intelligence from the archive is accurate and Tehran lied in the past, its behavior should be judged by whether it is complying with the deal now. “There shouldn’t be oversight through media reports,” Bell said. “As with any agreement, issues come up and they should be dealt with in the proper channels. They should be addressed by the JCPOA parties.”

She noted that before it withdrew from the deal, the Trump administration twice declared Iran in compliance, and the IAEA has done so 15 times. “The JCPOA is working,” Bell said.

Even so, the existence of the archive under the authority of a mysterious Iranian organization has raised concerns among some governments and the IAEA over whether Iran is preserving its ability to build nuclear weapons in the future. Under the JCPOA, Iran must mainly relinquish its ability to enrich and reprocess weapons-grade fuel, subject to rigorous IAEA inspection.

Matthew Levitt of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a former Bush administration official who worked on Iran, said the revelation that Iran “never came clean on all this, where they were on the weapons back then, that’s a biggie. The question is where they were at the time of the JCPOA. That’s why some people in the intelligence community were so keen on getting a deal—Iran had so much breakout ability at the time

As to what happens now, with Tehran still nominally observing the nuclear pact, “the likelihood that Iran does anything very publicly is very small,” Levitt said. “The question is how far do they go in a clandestine fashion, given that they know what we know.”

Michael Hirsh is a senior correspondent and deputy news editor at *Foreign Policy*. Twitter: [@michaelphirsh](#)

TAG: IRAN NUCLEAR

[VIEW
COMMENTS](#)